

# Engaging God's Mission through Justice and Compassion: An Evangelical Discourse.

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"Christian life is not a life divided between times for action and times for contemplation. No. Real social action is a way of contemplation, and real contemplation is the core of social action."  
— Henri J.M. Nouwen

## Abstract

*In the mind of many Evangelicals, "doing justice" is inextricably linked to the loss of sound doctrine, spiritual dynamism and a watering down of the gospel. The exploration of this article investigates the actions of the Evangelical church in South Africa with regards to her engagements with the mission of God on earth. Hampshire (1982:95) states "Is it possible that a person might not be doing what he/she honestly say he/she will be doing, without being true that what he/she is not doing is what he or she is intended to do?". An argument, is, therefore, made for missional hermeneutic in reading the Bible, thus bringing to exploration the statement articulated by Wright (2006) it is not much the case that God has a mission for his church in the world as that God has a church for his mission in the world. Mission was not made for the Church; Church was made for mission- God's mission. In this article, the theology of compassion will be examined through missional hermeneutics and how it relates to the "actions" of the Evangelical Church in post-apartheid South Africa. This understanding of compassion calls for a radical decentring of self, and putting at risk of the self in the free re-enactment of the dispossessed state of those who suffer (Davies, 2001), for human action is a moral action. God calls us to "do justice, to love mercy and to walk humbly before the Lord" (Micah 6:18). This article concludes that engaging in compassionate acts does not lead to a social gospel or a lesser understanding of the gospel but a more biblical (orthodox) understanding of the Christian good news.*

## 1. Introduction

Few themes are more central to any conversation on social ethic than justice, more so than the mission God. Chester (2002:19) writes "mission of God is the proclamation and demonstration of the gospel. It is simply not that evangelism and social involvement are to be done alongside each other". However, rather our evangelicalism must lead us to social engagement and *vice versa*. They are to be integral parts of each other. Chester (2002:19) goes on to state, "if we ignore the world we betray the word of God which sends us out to be of service to the world.

However, if we ignore the word then we have nothing to bring to the world". This paper will take a four-pronged approach to this subject. First, a critical enquiry will be engaged. This approach espouses that the various practices that are performed by the church are deeply meaningful and must be critically assessed if they are to be and to remain faithful to scripture. This will be analysed in light of the missional hermeneutical approach. Russell<sup>1</sup> defines missional hermeneutics as:

An interpretive approach that privileges mission as the key to reading the Scriptures. Missional hermeneutics works across the spectrum of approaches to the biblical text. It takes seriously the historical situation of the text ("behind the text"). It recognizes the influence of the reader's social location ("in front of the text"). Yet it is fundamentally rooted in a close reading of the text ("the world of the text"). A missional hermeneutic seeks to hear the Scriptures as an authoritative guide to God's mission in the world so that communities of faith can participate fully in God's mission.

The second approach will be theological reflection, the primary task in this section is to explore the understanding of justice and compassion and how this understanding guides us to provide a theological framework.

The third locus is to observe the social ethical engagement of the church to that of the world. While the church exists in the world, it should be noted that all human beings participate implicitly or explicitly in the missional narrative of God. Swinton and Mowat (2006:8) states the practises of the church cannot be understood as ontologically separate from the practices of the world. Both are caught up in God's redemptive movement towards the world. However, he clarifies his understanding by showing the fundamental dissimilarities and discontinuity between the church and the world by emphasising that the church understands that while we are part of the creation, however this is not our permanent residence and our existence in this temporal realm is lived recognizing who Jesus Christ is and, therefore, the church seeks to live in the light of that knowledge. Forrester (1990:16) explicitly formulates this distinction of the church's social practice by stating that those who believe and adhere to the teaching of Jesus Christ "have been called to make explicit the celebration of God's work". Thus, the world and the church have a significantly different *telos* (purpose). Therefore, it can be stated that the church does not exist merely to meet needs; like Christ, the church exists to glorify the Father.

The fourth approach is authentic and faithful practice. While any practice should take the human need and experience seriously, that in itself is not the goal or purpose of the church's action. In understanding our purposes, this approach will ensure and encourage that all our social engagement find faithful participation in the continuing gospel narrative, thus enabling faithful presence and action. The church, therefore, should be concerned with the doing of the truth in action as reflected in Scripture.

Our solidarity with fellow human is often overlooked in the assertion of our individuality. Donnes ([www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/meditation17.php](http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/meditation17.php)) expresses the truth of human solidarity:

No man is an island, entire of itself; everyman is a piece of the continent, a part of a man. If a clod be washed away by the sea, *Africa* is the less, as well as if a promontory were, as well as if a manor of thy friend's or of thine own were: any *person's* death diminishes me, because I am involved in mankind, and, therefore, never send to know for whom the bells toll; it toll for thee (*italics mine*).

How then do we respond to the injustices that we see around us? It begins with an understanding of justice from God's perspectives that motivate us to seek justice for the other. Gruchy (2005: 30) states as a "Christian undertaking, development finds its primary theological grounding in our understanding of God. Moreover, in doing so, we recognise that God's being and God's acts are congruent. In other words, there is a direct relationship between who God is in God-self, and how God relates to the world."

## 2. Missional Hermeneutics: Understanding of Justice

The Gospel narrative is a drama of God's justice displayed in Jesus Christ, but before an understanding of justice can be underscored, attention needs to be given to the understating of missional hermeneutic as the trajectory used for this development. Rajoo (2012) in his book *Missiobeat* observes the heartbeat of God that pulsates throughout scripture, which is God's love for humanity. This love is fully seen through the act of Jesus Christ on the cross where compassion and justice meet. However, in developing a missional hermeneutics, I am indebted to Wright's (2006) work entitled *The Mission Of God: Unlocking the Bible Grand Narrative*. Wright using the work of Brownson defines the hermeneutical trajectory. Brownson (1996) states that:

An understanding of the hermeneutical function of the gospel is critical to a healthy approach to biblical hermeneutics. Interpretation will always emerge out of different contexts. There will be different traditions brought to bear by various interpreters. In the midst of this, the gospel functions as a framework that lends a sense of coherence and commonality.

Wright however brings clarity to Brownson hermeneutical framework by stating who bring this coherence. Wright (2006:41) states that Jesus himself provides the hermeneutical coherence within which all readers must read the text that is in the light of the story that leads up to Christ (messianic reading) and the story that leads on from Christ (missional reading). That is the story that flows from the mind and the

purpose of God in all the scriptures for all the nations. That for Wright is the missional hermeneutic of the whole Bible.

If Jesus as shown by Wright (2006) becomes the coherent factor of our hermeneutics, how then do we understand justice in the grand narrative of the gospel? Luke 4:17-18 announces the ministry of Jesus. Jesus identifies himself as the suffering servant reflected in Isaiah 42:1-7 as the one who would bring about justice. Keller (2010: ix) states that while most understand this text as Jesus who came to bring forgiveness and grace, less well known is the biblical teaching that a true experience of grace motivates a person to seek justice in the world. Therefore, Micah 6:8 is a summary of how God wants us to live "to do justice and to love mercy." *Chesedh* (mercy) is God's unconditional grace and compassion as will be seen in the next section. However, our focus here is *mishpat*-justice. Keller (2010:3) states that the word justice occurs more than 200 times in the Old Testament and means more than just acquitting of people, but it also means to give people their rights. Why must we seek to do justice, because I argue that justice is found in God's character? Justice is fundamental to God's holiness (Isa 30:18, 61:8). It is, therefore, important at this point to understand what we mean by justice as the right application of power.

#### Justice: The Right Exercise of Power

What does it mean to say that God is a God of justice? Haugen (2009:84) states that justice has to do with the exercise of power. To say that God is a God of justice is to say that he cares about the right use of power. Haugen (*ibid*) further explains that God is the ultimate power and authority in the universe, so justice occurs when power and authority is exercised in conformity with his standards. As earlier indicated, the terms justice and righteousness are used interchangeably, both indicating a conformity to God's standard of holiness or moral excellence. Therefore, this understanding of justice calls us to action, taking up the cause of those who are weak in their defence (cf. Isa 58:6; Job 29:16; Jer 2:12). The Lord expects from his community a people committed to that righteousness and justice that reflects his character. This is because, at all levels, we are charged with the primary purpose of maintaining and restoring righteousness and justice. Fundamentally justice has to deal with the exercise of power. So justice occurs when power and authority between people are exercised in accordance to his standard of moral purity. Therefore, it could be stated that God who is just and who is the epitome of justice is concerned with how justice is appropriated by those who have the power and authority over others who have less political, economic, social, moral, religious, cultural, financial and intellectual power. When these powers are exploited and not used in accordance to God's standard, injustice occurs. Thus injustice is the abuse of power against the weak. Haugen (2009:87) argues that injustice occurs when power is misused to take from others what God has given them, namely, their life, dignity, liberty or the fruits of their love and labour. Thus, injustice is the arbitrary use of power and deceit to exploit the weak (Ecc 4:1). Scripture informs us that God has

not forgotten the injustices brought upon the weak (cf. Ps 10:13-14). This principle is important because it affirms that the Lord hates injustice. While we become insensitive to the injustices to much of the abuse in society, God maintains a strong, holy hatred of injustices (cf. Ps 71:11, 11:5-7). In this we understand the true character of God, when we come to understand his passion about justice. This is great hope that allows Christians to be vigorous advocates for justice in an exhausted, despairing world. Because Evangelicals have spiritualised the justice the God to only salvation, this has led to this important truth to lie dormant in the quite recess of our heart. Unwittingly we become hoarders of hidden hope.

Justice, justification, worship, political engagement, spiritual and material change all belong together. As in the life of Jesus Christ, being, doing and saying must become a part of the Christian's integral mission. This call for justice is a call back to the centrality of Jesus Christ's core values alluded to in Luke 4:17-18. His life of sacrificial service is the standard for us to follow. In his life and through his death, Jesus Christ displays for us identification with the poor and the inclusion of the other. The cross becomes for us the epitome of God's proclamation of justice, reconciling both rich and poor to himself through the [redemptive] work of Jesus Christ. The grace of God is the heartbeat of a missional God. Chester (2005:19) then rightfully observes that as recipients of this underserved love, we are to show grace and generosity, for, through grace, justice is redefined as not merely honouring a contract, but helping the disadvantaged.

### 3. The Theology of Compassion

Compassion is the process of self-dispossession, where one puts self at risk, in a free re-enactment of the dispossessed state of those who suffer. Compassion<sup>ii</sup> according to Davies (2001:17) is the recognition of the otherness of the other as an otherness that stands beyond our own world, and yet the experience of the other brings into focus our own nature. It is because of this realization that self assumes the burden of the other because we recognize the "veiled presence of being" in the other. It, therefore can be stated that compassion falls under the broad category of love, which requires a definition or understanding of love. Love in the context of relationship can be established in two broad categories *eros*-love and *agape*-love. *Eros*-love can be glossed as "appetite" or "need". In dealing with relationships, the need to love can militate towards an appetite for love. The different relational experience we find ourselves depicts how *eros*-love functions. However, this close relationship we share with others on the basis of *eros*-love through which we are called to *agape*-love of self-dispossessing affirmation of a particular other. *Agape*-love is revealed in the demonstration of God's love to the world in sending Jesus Christ, who "dispossess" of himself so that the other (people) can be freed from sin. This selfless act of love reflects the compassionate heart of God. He who knew no sin...became sinful. This act of Jesus Christ set the example for us to follow, yet

Louwen et al. (2005:4) makes it very clear that one should not underestimate how hard it is to be compassionate, the reason being because it requires the inner disposition to go with others to a place that makes us uncomfortable because it challenges our own realities. What we desire most is to do away with suffering by fleeing from it or pretending it does not exist. However, Christ seeing the pain before him accepted the suffering of the cross. Louwen et al. (2005:4) further explains how this can be the action in our life by stating:

Compassion asks us to go where it hurts, to enter into the places of pain, to share in brokenness, fear, confusion, and anguish. Compassion challenges us to cry out with those in misery, to mourn with those who are lonely, to weep with those in tears. Compassion requires us to be weak with the weak, vulnerable with the vulnerable, and powerless with the powerless. Compassion means full immersion in the condition of being human.

It is in the incarnation and through the cross that the fullest expression of justice and compassion coming together in Jesus Christ our example is seen.

#### 4. The Practice of Social Action within the Evangelical Church

It is difficult to talk about the moral life without focusing on human action. I began to argue for a theological understanding of compassion and justice, which brings me to this section, the understanding of the nature and place of human action within Evangelicalism with regards to the poor and the vulnerable. Due to the tremendous disagreement about action towards the poor as part of the gospel narrative within Evangelicalism, I think that Aquinas, with some care will help this discussion to come to a clearer understanding of action, than any other contemporary<sup>iii</sup> ethicist. Aquinas introduces us to how he understands the action of man. In this section, I will follow the argument of Aquinas in *Summa* I-II 7 Q 6 to explain his understanding of action.

Aquinas following the ethical argument of St. Augustine (*On Christian Doctrine* III:10) that the purpose of man is happiness, this happiness, however, can only be found in God and loving our neighbour. Because human beings are created in the image of God, we are, therefore, intelligent beings endowed with the power of free will and self-movement. He goes on to state, as creation comes from God, so action comes from the human being. As creation displays the work of God so does action display the work of human beings. These actions are different from that of the animal world. For Aquinas, these actions must lead to happiness, which come from God. Since, it is proper for human being to act, this self-movement leads to happiness, passion and virtue or even at times vice. When we work according to our created principle, the action is considered moral. Therefore, for Aquinas, human beings do not just think about their acts, rather thinking involves our acting and, so action have their final place within the place of relation to that of other human beings and so ultimately to God. If our actions are intended to bring us happiness that find its ultimate reality

in God, how then must Evangelicals, morally respond to the plight of other human being? The cross, therefore, then should become the moral centre of our faith. At the cross, we find the fullest and purest action of justice and compassion. The work of Jesus Christ on the cross<sup>iv</sup> becomes our example to follow when acting upon the needs of fellow man.

## 6. Conclusion

Evangelicalism came to be identified as a world transformative faith. However, Evangelicals see the “social gospel” as the Trojan horse of liberalism that turns away from a biblical form of mission that should concentrate solely on personal salvation and church planting. While we cannot ignore the positive impact that Evangelicalism has on the growth of Christianity, the absence of a social theology often left the church voiceless in a context in which injustices needed to be challenged. The church can only regain its voice through a proper understanding of compassion as part of the mission of God that calls us to act upon the socio-economic and socio-political structures and systems that are causing injustice and pain in society. The gospel that we share calls us to social responsibility.

As Evangelicals, we should embrace the witness of the whole Bible as it shows us God’s desire both for systemic economic justice and for personal compassion, respect and generosity towards the poor and needy as reflected in The Cape Town Commitment of the Third Lausanne Congress held in Cape Town 2010. For the church is called to be an audible public presence of God, and retreats into invisibility only by betraying her calling, to be on mission with God, she loses her most important purpose and reason for her existence (*raison d’être*). In the words of Grunchy (2005: 360) “The mission of the Church, thus draws it inexorably into the task of development, which we have defined as: social, cultural, religious, ecological, economic and political activities that consciously seek to enhance the self-identified livelihoods of the poor. This is not an optional extra for the Church, but is at the very essence of what it means to be the people of God, seeking to be faithful to the *missio Dei* as manifest in Jesus Christ”. In doing so, Evangelicals do not just say nice things about God, his love, mercy, justice and compassion. The point of being missional is to share the love of God in word and deed as aptly reminded by the Apostle James (Jm 2:17) “Thus also faith by itself if it does not have works, is dead” (NIV).

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<sup>i</sup> See Brain Russell ://www.catalystresources.org/what-is-a-missional-hermeneutic/#sthash.guJ0cfdJ.dpuf

<sup>ii</sup> Borg in *Meeting Jesus* draws his understanding of compassion from the OT to mean “like a womb” or “wombish” in the sense that compassion has nuances of giving life, nourishing, caring perhaps embracing and encompassing. Thus to feel what God feels and to act as God acts: in a life giving and nourishing way”

<sup>iii</sup> Contemporary ethicists like Paul Ramsey and Joseph Fletcher.

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<sup>iv</sup> Botman (2006:72-88) states that the South African constitution provides guidelines for social action in the discourse of “empowering equality”, however I tend to disagree. I believe it is only through the cross that our humanity and dignity is restored.

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